Smile: Why Worship Band Faces Matter

Yes – Smiling Worship Bands Are Better Worship Bands

The songs are joyful. The songs are beautiful. But for a solid 30 minutes the worship leader's face seems intense with concentration. Wait. So does the background vocalist's face as she stares at her music stand. Why do I feel disengaged from those on the stage right now – and even from worship?



I'm scanning the stage for one smile, one engaging glance, over 30 minutes… there one is! The keyboard player looks up, and smiles! The room lights up.

For that moment, I feel like I am a participant in a community rather than a spectator in an audience.

Is Smiling Disingenuous?

For 25 years I've gotten pushback on this one. "Why should we smile? It feels forced, or contrived. Besides, if I don't feel like it, and I look up every once in a while and do it, isn't it disingenuous – or even creepy?"

No. It's not disingenuous, contrived, or creepy. It's leadership. It's real. It's community. It's engagement. And looking up every once in a while – let alone smiling – helps you engage with God worship, as well as the congregation.

Why Smiling Worship Bands Are Better Worship Bands

First of all, let's remind ourselves of the radical, radical difference between a worship band and an artist band.

- The worship band is there for *corporate expression* rather than self-expression.
- The worship band is there to *encourage us all in our faith*, not just to execute music.
- The worship band – and every musician in it – is *a leader of engaged worship*, not just the main leader.

A worship band is leading an experience that has to do with *all* of us. And when the band and the leader are:

- Fixated on their chord charts
- Looking continually intense or "semi-lost in God" (ever see the 30 minute, closed-eyes, "yearning" face?)
- Unfamiliar with the music or feeling tentative and expressing that visually…

…it deeply affects the congregation in corporate worship.

If even *one* of the band members looks either uncomfortable, awkward, or semi-scared to be up there, it impacts the worship dynamic in the congregation.

You Are A Visual Leader

Please hear me. I am no fan of fake smiles and cheesy attempts to feign that something awesome is happening in the room when it isn't. That's not what this is about.

I have just seen, over 25 years, that if even just 4-5 times during a 30 minute set each musician looks up, and visually connects with the congregation in a way that says "It's good to be here together," it *literally changes the dynamic in the room.*

I'm a leader when I am leading worship, and so is everyone on the worship team. Like it or not, we are more than musical leaders, prayer leaders, or technical leaders.

We are *visual leaders*. Every single one of us that is on a stage or in front of our congregation is a visual leader. What we do matters.

In the "band up front" model of worship settings (not the only one, I may add), you are being watched, like it or not.

And, silently, people are *taking their cues* from your face. Really.

Yes, even from the drummer. With some drummers I've played with, they virtually lead the worship with their exuberance, sense of worshipful engagement, and musical comfort.

Engage Your Pleasant Face

A few things can just be laid out on the table, and may help us know what we're up against. And "having a face-that-says-I-don't-hate-this" is not the same as having a pleasant face.

1. **Avoid concentrating too hard on the music.**

   The less comfortable we are with the music, the more we'll concentrate. No one smiles, or looks pleasant, when they're concentrating. There are several reasons this happens, but none of them are good excuses.

   Remedy: Get familiar with the music. Worship leaders, practice a lot the week before, and rehearse

when possible. Musicians, listen to the set, and learn the music at least well enough for you to look up. When at all possible, with 5-6 chord MAXIMUM songs, MEMORIZE the music.

Break through the psychological barrier that you *can't* memorize songs. You can.Worship leaders, yes, I just said that. You and I can memorize at least most of the music. 6 chords. It takes lots and lots of practice, over years, yet our ear gets better at hearing what should come next. We just get lazy, hug our props, and don't put in the time. Selah. (And note that next week, I may need a few lyric charts to get me through the set well.)

2. **Realize each week that everyone is, often, watching us.**

   Honestly, especially if we're in IEMs (in-ear monitors), I think that many musicians innocently imagine they are isolated, and unseen. They lose themselves in their part. But that's wrong. Everyone is watching your face, at least 8-12 times during that 30 minute set. If you don't look like you want to be there, or this is uncomfortable, or it's awkward, or that this-is-about-more-than-the-music, it affects them.

   Remedy: Realize you are a visual leader, not just a musical one. Be aware that your sense of joy, or frustration, is contagious and visible. Good leadership means you have the courage to set your intensity aside to engage, and even enjoy, what is happening around you. Do it for your sake, and the sake of the community who has come together that week to worship God.

3. **Don't forget that you're a leader, and we're at war.**

   This is a big one. I speak fairly often in front of crowds. I often have had a rough morning, a rough weekend, or a rough week. As a leader (an INFP one at that), I often feel like I should change my message, or my attitude, to match my week. Shouldn't everyone feel what I'm feeling? Isn't wearing it and airing it an act of authenticity?
   No.
   As a leader, I prophesy to myself, and to those I'm speaking to, by being engaged, passionate about the Scriptures, and smiling occasionally as an act of both encouragement and sheer war against the demonic forces of depression, sadness, despair, and fear that are at work in people's lives in that room. A smile, and visual actions of engagement, can change our attitude and that of our community.

What I Am Saying, And What I Am Not Saying

I am saying we should be aware, and that every musician on any worship stage – especially the worship leader – needs to look up at least 3-5 times during a 30 minute set and engage with the congregation.

Looking up, with an occasional smile or pleasant face, builds a sense of community – and *breaks down the invisible barrier between the stage and the wider community*.

Fight The Powers Of The Stage– For The Sake Of Community

Fight the psychological power of In-Ear Monitors, Stages, Music Stands and the isolation they can nurture.

Fight the need to "feel unseen." You are not unseen. Even if a toddler closes their eyes and thinks they are invisible, they are not. It's the same with us.

Fight those powers. We need to feel like we're all in this moment together, and if the tech is getting in the way you don't always need to lose the tech – you and I can *beat* the tech, just like we can beat your own natural inclination to ignore what our face is doing for 30 minutes.

And in those moments of connection and engagement, on occasion, crack something that looks remarkably like, similar to, even possibly the actual goods of – a *smile*.

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Question: Why is it a struggle for worship musicians, in your experience, to act like they are part of the wider community when playing?

Resource: These ideas are covered in more depth in the Essentials In Worship video course.

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